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ABSTRACT

The language of a small group of 4-year-old Chicano children in a predominantly Chicano nursery school setting (Chicano 85%, Black 13%, Anglo 2%) is the focus of this study, which investigates the phonology of communication, the grammar and syntax of conversations, and the sociocognitive influence on English language usage as expressed by 4-year-old Chicano children. The experimental design used was to (1) identify and randomly select one-half of the 4-year-old Chicano children enrolled in a model city nursery school, (2) conduct 3 interviews with the children during a 4-week period, and (3) analyze the audio-taped interviews and their transcription for linguistic data. The 3 interviews with 14 students consisted of (1) a general conversational interview session with each student to "get to know" each other, (2) a "picture description" test in which they were asked questions about the picture, and (3) a general type conversation in which it was attempted to elicit a spontaneous type of conversation. These interviews were conducted to one side of the center of the classroom. The results indicated that certain well-defined linguistic problems exist in the use of English by Chicano children, that, because of ethnocentric tendencies by most language researchers and teachers, Chicano children suffer unnecessarily in the classroom because of their language difficulties, that their language and culture must be honored, and that their education should proceed from "where they are" to "where their abilities will take them." (NQ)

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# THE LANGUAGE OF THE FOUR YEAR OLD CHICANO

"Cada cabeza es un mundo"*

by

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# THE LANGUAGE OF THE FOUR YEAR OLD CHICANO

"Cada cabeza es un mundo"

Knowledge of a child's language is most important in attempting to understand and deal with the educational problems of Mexican American children in our schools. For 1st, 2nd, 3rd generation Mexican Americans or chicanos of the Southwest, language studies that attempt to deal with the social aspects of chicano English language usage are very few. Specifically, I am referring to language studies that probe the sociolinguistic patterns of English speaking four year old chicano children. This is an area that, I think, needs to be studied more extensively. If this sounds obnoxious to some of you in the audience, please don't worry about it, because I plan to clarify this a little further, later on.

For the moment, I want to bring to your attention the fact that very little is known about four year old chicano language. We know more about Finnish, Russian, and Turkish child talk because these are areas that government agencies and researchers appear to be more interested in. (1)

On the other hand, there is a greater concern for the study of the chicano child's self-image and socio-cultural background; studies in these areas are numerous and can be easily found in most libraries. (2) This is one area that most chicanos will agree, has been well researched, sometimes rather shoddily, but it has been researched. It should be pointed out that while these researchers are generally available to teachers and the public in general, it has been the misuse of these materials by teachers that accounts for a good number of the problems encountered by chicano students, i.e., the literature states that Mexican Americans lack motivation, have poor attitudes, are not future oriented, are fatalistic, religious, etc. Teachers generally will unquestioningly accept and seek to verify the literature and in so doing will promulgate the stereo-

type by paying lip-service to the meaning of education and individualized instruction and reinforce the debilitating effects of the stereotype on the child.

The teacher who has acquired a "cultural awareness" of the chicano child but who has failed to achieve a semblance of understanding of the child's language could possibly do much more harm to the child's understanding of himself and his environment than the teacher who is not "culturally sensitive" at all. I shall give you some examples of this a little later on. What I am suggesting here is that knowledge of early childhood language is extremely essential to the teacher of the four to ten year old chicano child because it is during this period that the phonological, morphological and syntactical structures are learned by the child. (3) It is also extremely important that the teacher be cognizant of the socio-cognitive aspects of the language of the chicanos of this age group.

## Problem of the Study

The views currently maintained by some authorities like Bernstein and perpetuated by De Cecco that there is a public language which is restricted and characteristic of the working class in this investigator's opinion expresses the "ethnocentric syndrome" that is so prevalent in a large number of language researches. (4) This is the syndrome that has produced the notion of "deficit" for any group in society that does not meet the narrow band expectations of the middle class segment of the population from which most researches come from.

The purpose of this investigation was to focus on the language of a small group of four year old chicano children in a nursery school setting which is predominantly chicano (Chicano 85%, Black 13%, Anglo 2%). Specifically, it was the purpose of this study to investigate:

1. the phonology of communication

2. the grammar and syntax of conversations,
3. the socio-cognitive influences on English language usage as expressed by four year old chicano children

From the onset this researcher hypothesized that the young Ss would show some difficulty with certain English sounds. It was also hypothesized that the Ss would show some difficulty with the grammar and syntax and that the Ss would demonstrate other forms of nonverbal communication not ordinarily observed by language investigators.

## Review of the Literature

The purpose of this review of the literature is not to offer an extensive resume of the writings of a number of authorities, but rather to indicate rather quickly, first, that research on the speech behavior of young children has produced certain bench marks characteristic of children's speech and language usage, and secondly, that certain language research techniques have been attempted--some more successfully than others. I'm not going to elaborate on this any more, but such names as Sapir, Whorf, Bloomfield, Bernstein, Ervin-Tripp, Lenneberg, Labov, Gumperz, Slobin, Basso, to mention but a few, should give you some indication of the people that I have relied on as a basis for this study. (5) A quick look at the bibliography will give you some indication of the nature of their work: The samples thay have used and the techniques they have employed.

## Experimental Design

The design of this investigation into the language usage of the four year old chicano was to (1) identify and randomly select approximately one-half of the four year old chicano children enrolled in a model cities nursery school, (2) conduct three interviews with the children during a four week period, (3) analyze the audio-taped interviews and their transcription for linguistic data.

The identification of the Ss was accomplished in consultation with two teachers and four teacher-aides with special emphasis on the identification of bilingual chicano children. Since this investigator was concerned with the language usage

of the chicano child, only fourteen of the twenty-one chicano children enrolled in the school were interviewed and observed.

The interviewing sessions with the Ss consisted of three interviews in the order as follows:

(1) A general interview session was conducted with each of the selected Ss. This session was a sort of "get to know" each other session of a general conversation nature.

(2) A "picture description" test was devised for the Ss. The Ss during this session were asked questions such as Who, What, Where, When, How, and "tell me"--"ask me" of the picture.

(3) The last interviewing session consisted of a general type conversation. Different techniques were used in this session in an attempt to elicit a spontaneous type of conversation from each of the Ss.

In seeking a natural or more casual approach to the interviewing that was conducted, all sessions were conducted in the classroom itself and to one side of the center of the room. The classroom was noisy but not distracting to the extent that the Ss were not able to respond with genuine interest.(6)

The audio-taped interview and conversations were transcribed and the results studied with special interest on the Ss phonology, grammar-syntax and socio-cognitive (social understanding) aspects of language usage.

This study proceeded with the following assumptions and limitations:

Assumptions

1. That the Ss would respond freely in an open testing situation.
2. That all Ss would not get distracted by the equipment or the other students or the investigator.

Limitations

1. That the students in the classroom would create a lot of noise and compete for attention.
2. That the equipment would interfere with the conversations and the testing.

## Results

### Phonology

The problems that a four year old chicano child has with English language pronounciation are in some respects like those that an adult chicano has with

his pronounciation. (7) In our small sample, the most common phonological problem areas observed from the picture description test interviews were with:

'ch' sound as in /chair/ pronounced /shair/
or as in /teacher/ pronounced /teasher/
'si' sound as in /sitting/ pronounced /seeting/
'gi' sound as in /girl/ pronounced /gerol/
'he' sound as in /hello/ pronounced /hallo/

These were the most obvious responses that had any consistency of occurrence with most of the Ss. Other words that were erratically mispronounced included the words:

/scissors/ pronounced by some Ss /skizors/
/spoon/ pronounced by some Ss /spun/
/playing/ pronounced by some Ss /pley-ing/
/very/ pronounced by some Ss /beri/

The range of possibilities as you can see from these pictures (show pictures) is limited, and rightly so, since this was the intent of this phase of the interview. Almost all of the problem producing phonemes are to be found in these pictures. If some sounds like the "shwa" sound are not indicated here it is because they just didn't present themselves in this testing.

Grammar-Syntax

In this picture interviewing situation, it must be mentioned that the interviewer attempted to give the Ss as much time to respond as it seemed needed by the Ss. After repeating the questions as carefully and naturally as possible. Wherever and whenever possible prompting by the use of cues such as 'and', 'or', 'go on', etc., were used so as to give the respondents more time and opportunity to express themselves in the context of the situation.

Very close to the areas identified under phonology but more akin to morphology and syntax were the occasional errors that were made evident from the picture testing such as:

"The manswas sitting down" in response to "What is the man doing"?
"That's the records" in response to "What is this?"
"They're cutting the papers" in response to "What are the girls doing?"

"I don't have no daddy" in response to "Does your daddy play with you?"

It would seem that the grammatical errors made under these circumstances were linguistically significant, in that they involved an error in making the plural form (mans, records, papers). The use of "thats" in the phrase (thats the records) appeared to be a contraction of "that is" which did not agree with the noun "record."

One other area that appeared to be an area of occasional error was the failure in usage agreement between subject and verb possibly because of lack of familiarity with other areas of the grammar such person, number, and gender (Example: "They're making papers in the house.")

In the conversations of the first and third interviews, the grammatical errors most obvious were similar to the ones mentioned above - those of the plurals and the contractions. The apparent misuse of contractions and possessive noun forms appeared to be an area of some confusion as evidenced by the responses:

"My daddy's..." and "I don't have no daddy's"

The use of the suffix ing in the present progressive form with a lst. person plural subject in some classes did not appear to be an obstacle for the Ss. (Example: "We are playing.")

Syntactically, the language of these four year olds under the second interviewing conditions were limited to more phrases than complete sentences. For example:

"Nothing" in response to "What is he doing?"
"Go like this" in response to "What is she doing?"
"Papers on the floor" in response to "Tell me what are the girls doing?"
"A girl with a spoon and the knife" in response to "Ask me what the girl is doing?"

Generally speaking, the sentences that were verbalized during the course of the 2nd. interview by the Ss were short and ranged from one to eight words with

an average of four words per sentence. With prompting (the use of cues) one S responded with four complete sentences for a total of 27 running words while the arithmetic mean for the group was 14.0.

Socio-Cognitive

In the area of the understanding of the socially required language behavior of a "student," the Ss demonstrated a verbal understanding of the student-teacher role. This was evident from interviews (1) and (3), where, in their own idiosynchractic way, they, the Ss, took their seats when asked, quieted down on command, started to work on their projects when directed to do so, and talked about their teacher. On occasion, some Ss, of course, did not listen, or want to accept the instructions of the teacher, and proceeded to do something else. The Ss by their verbal actions also demonstrated an awareness of why they were attending school. Such comments as:

"Mommy goes to school"
"I don't have no daddy"
"Mama works, daddy works"

These were commonly made in response to the questions:

Do you like to help your mommy in the kitchen?
How does your daddy play ball with you?
Do you like to visit with your friends?

Specific reactions to interview number (2), the picture description test, revealed that while the Ss grammar and syntax might have been rudimentary, the ideas and abstractions they protected were vivid and imaginative. For example, in response to the question:

Who is this? (the father) a response made by one of the Ss was: "A monster, a monster." (jokingly, of course!)
Tell me what she is doing? (the mother) a response made was "making salad with tomatoes, pepper, cucumber."
Ask me what he is doing? (the father) a response made was "Pointing and getting ready to eat."

It might be of general interest to point out that Carroll Chomsky's observation that New England four year old children cannot discriminate between "tell me" and "ask me" also applies to our sample of four year old Mexican American children. When our Ss were asked:

> "Ask me what the girls are doing," and then later when they were asked, "Tell me what the girls are doing," they proceeded to describe what the girls were doing as they had just previously done.

As indicators of understanding of other social relationships, the following responses were heard from the Ss on different occasions:

> "When will you read to us?"
> "Where is our other teacher?"
> "Hi - are you coming back to see me?"
> "Her mom's going to spank her!"
> "When will you let us play?"
> "Don't leave now."
> "Hurry up John, get in here!"

These are a few of the many responses elicited from the Ss in response to specific questions. On several occasions, this investigator overheard many conversations between teacher and student, student and another student, and teacher-aide and student. Conversations that indicated that the Ss had more command of the language than they had indicated in the "casual" but yet "formal" situation as viewed from an observer frame of reference.

## Analysis and Conclusions

The results of the study just elaborated on, indicate the "expected" type of approach normally followed in most language studies. To this investigator it is a perfect example of "ethnocentric syndrome" that is practiced by the majority of language researchers that continued to perpetuate the "deficit theory" of language for other cultures. My purpose for proceeding in this manner was intentional, and it was specifically designed to show the inadequacies, the ethnocentric tendencies, and the subtle ways in which racism continues to

grow like a bacteria on an agar plate! Let me now proceed to develop some arguments about the language of the four year old chicano.

Earlier, I referred to the understanding that the Ss had about their student role and their awareness about the purpose of going to school. Putting aside all other important areas of argument for purposes of brevity, I now want to return to these two areas and approach them from the Ss linguistic point of view. In effect what I propose to do is to look at some of the comments made by the Ss with an eye towards the cultural background of the bilingual and/or bicultural chicano and see if the comments they have made do not carry some other meaning.

In some Mexican American households, particularly those households that are not affluent and are located in barrios (8), Mexican-cultural heritage and language play a very important part in life of the family. Very early in life, most chicano children learn to show respect for their parents, for their elders, and for established authority. The young chicano also learns early in life that one way to show respect for a person is by standing straight and looking down in front of the person who is speaking to him, and not to be too verbal but to listen. In particular, if the child does not know the person very well and is being given a command or a reprimand, the child is expected to react in the manner described above. It usually takes a long time and lots of coaxing before a chicano child will react any differently to a new situation because this is the training and upbringing that he has had.

Now in reference to the child's perception of the teacher-student role, it should be clear that if the child does, in fact, come to school with this background (and in my study they did) the responses that the child makes could be expected to have these underlying tones. In the example given where the

children were given a command to be quiet, the response observed by this investigator was that most of the children did react in a subservient manner and exhibited the reticence that stems from this particular upbringing. This is not a value judgment on my part--the literature will substantiate this for me. (9) To what extent does this concern for respect for others (like the teacher) influence the students grammar-syntax and his understanding of a new language? The linguistic study like the one that prefaced these remarks will never help in achieving any understanding of a chicano's problem with English language acquisition.

The chicano child also learns early in the process of growing up that school is a special place where children go to learn about many things, as well as to learn how to read and write. To the four year old Mexican American child going to school means fun, excitement, and a chance to do things that he normally wouldn't do at home. Along with these considerations the child knows that there will be a maestro - a teacher who will be in charge and who will see to it that he learns. Again, respect is inextricably interwoven into the notion of going to school and one which is very much culturally bound. This might sound contradictory to what some people have said (10), but the fact remains that this is the case. (11)

To the chicano child that responds to the question:

> "Do you like to help your mommy in the kitchen?" by answering:
> "Yes, I do. Only at night. Mommy goes to school. I go to school too."

It would seem to this investigator that this child has a more meaningful concept of what school is all about than what his four sentences would lead one to believe.

In order that some of my listeners don't leave with the impression that, I am psychologizing too much, or that I am reading too much into the statements, permit me to bring to your attention that ethnocentrism knows no boundaries, and that all I have tried to say today has been very objective.

In conclusion, the results of this investigation show that there exist certain well defined linguistic (phonological, grammatical-syntactical) problems in the use of English by chicano children. However, this study also suggests that because of ethnocentric tendencies by most language researchers and teachers, the chicano child suffers unnecessarily in the classroom because of his language difficulties. Since language is symbolic and culturally bound, the language and culture of the four year old chicano must be honored while his education in the school proceeds from "where he is" to where "his abilities will take him."

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(8) "Barrios" is a term used to designate a neighborhood in a chicano community A "colonia mexicana" may have several barrios within its boundaries.

(9) Sabine Ulibarri, Tierra Amarilla (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1971)

(10) Celia S. Heller, Mexican American Youth-Forgotten Youth at the Crossroads (New York: Random House, 1967).

(11) Many independent studies have been done in communities like Tucson, Arizona and Bakersfield, California that clearly show the interest that both parents and children have for their schools. A genuine understanding of the Mexican American would reveal this fact to any researcher.